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Pack Mule Welfare on Expedition

How to ensure you are not responsible for animal neglect and cruelty



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Background

Overseas and mountain expeditions make use of local transport provision, including Sherpas, porters, pack animals and their handlers. Our responsibilities to Sherpas and porters have long been recognised but where pack animals are concerned, the industry has been blind to and ignorant of their suffering.

Remote mountain communities are often poor and isolated. The arrival of mountain tourism has resulted in an influx of mules and the growth and development of muleteering. This has happened without the provision of appropriate training and equipment. Consequently, there are many serious welfare concerns arising from a poor understanding of animal behaviour, husbandry, health and welfare.

Awareness of the various welfare issues is now growing and there is no longer any excuse for individuals or companies to turn a blind eye to the suffering of our four legged, hard working travel companions.

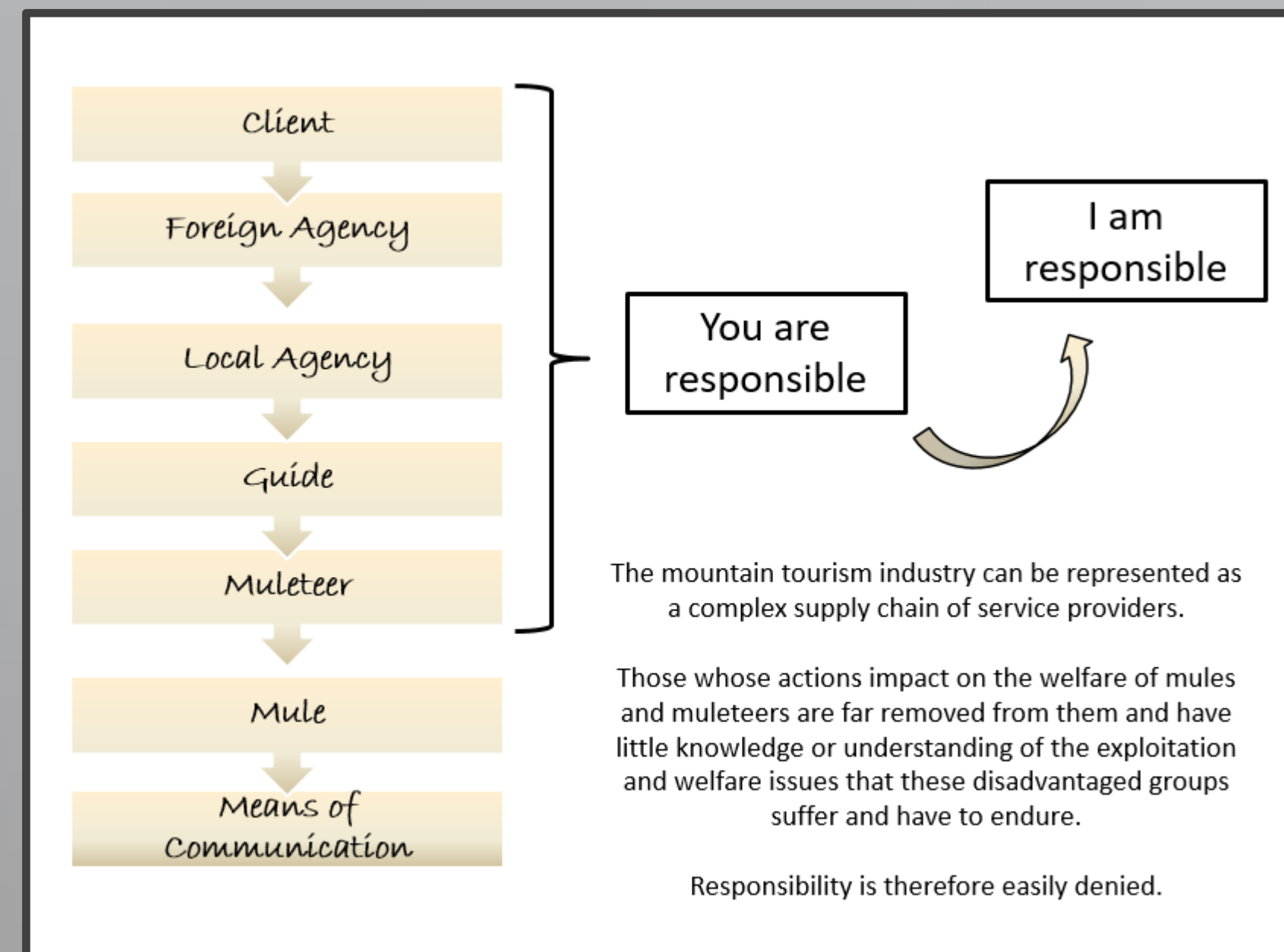
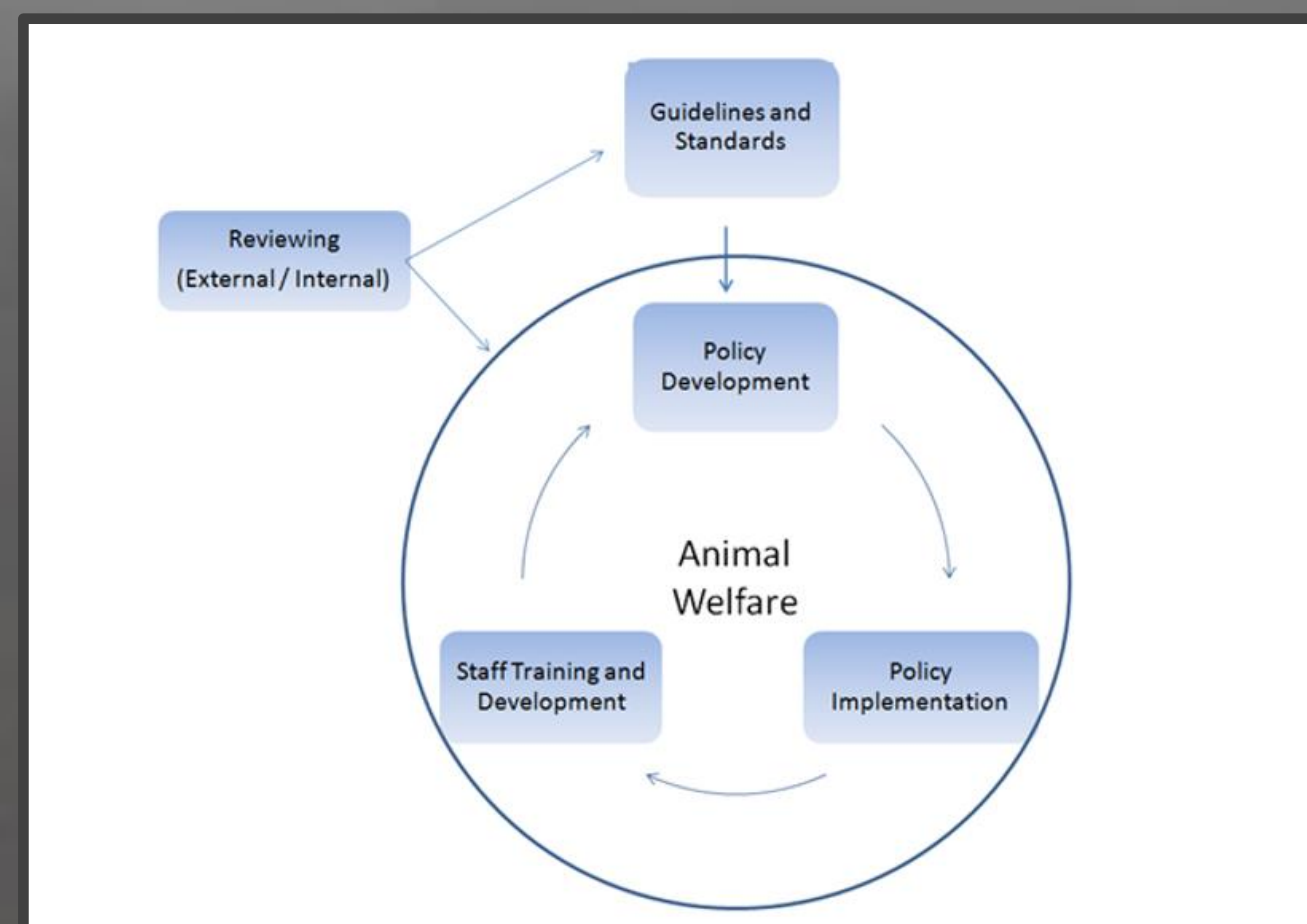
We are each responsible for the problem and must take action to ensure that we are not complicit in animal neglect and cruelty. Our choices, our decisions can put an end to the exploitation of pack mules and their owners.

Please therefore ensure you trek responsibly.

Policy development and implementation

Policies will address issues arising from poor animal relations and handling, overloading, lameness and wounds (especially those arising from equipment that promotes control rather than communication and those arising from ill-fitting, poorly maintained pack saddles and harnesses).

In practice, policies must be carefully implemented on the ground to ensure that all key welfare issues are addressed. Responsible companies and individuals will therefore be able to demonstrate a commitment to the training and development of their teams.



Introduction

The welfare of pack mules and muleteers has, until recently, been largely ignored by the Mountain Tourism and Expedition industries. Recent research work has, however, allowed those involved in the industry to recognise their responsibilities to the mules and muleteers working on their trips (Cousquer and Allison, 2012; Cousquer, 2015; Schmidt 2015). This poster provides an overview of the background history to this problem, the key concerns and the actions that you can take, in your capacity as an individual, an organisation, an expedition or as a travel company to really make a difference!

Ensure the team, travel agency or tour operator you travel with has a comprehensive mule welfare policy in place and a professional well-trained team of mules and muleteers.

Common Problems

Biting Injuries, Abusive Relations, Tethering Injuries, Overloading, Saddle Sores, Malnutrition and Weight Loss

A failure to understand good muleteering practice means that many pack mules are worked in traditional bits, where head collars would suffice. A good understanding of mule behaviour and of a mule's needs would recognise that these are grazing animals who can feed on the move and, in doing so, meet some of their essential behavioural and nutritional needs. The traditional bit, however, is designed to cause pain and discomfort and allows people with little respect for, or understanding of, their animals to work them effectively. This represents a betrayal of the animal and has no place in the modern world where we seek to promote trust and understanding as the basis for good relations in tourism. These bits also make eating and drinking very difficult if not impossible, thereby contributing to dental problems, malnutrition and weight loss.

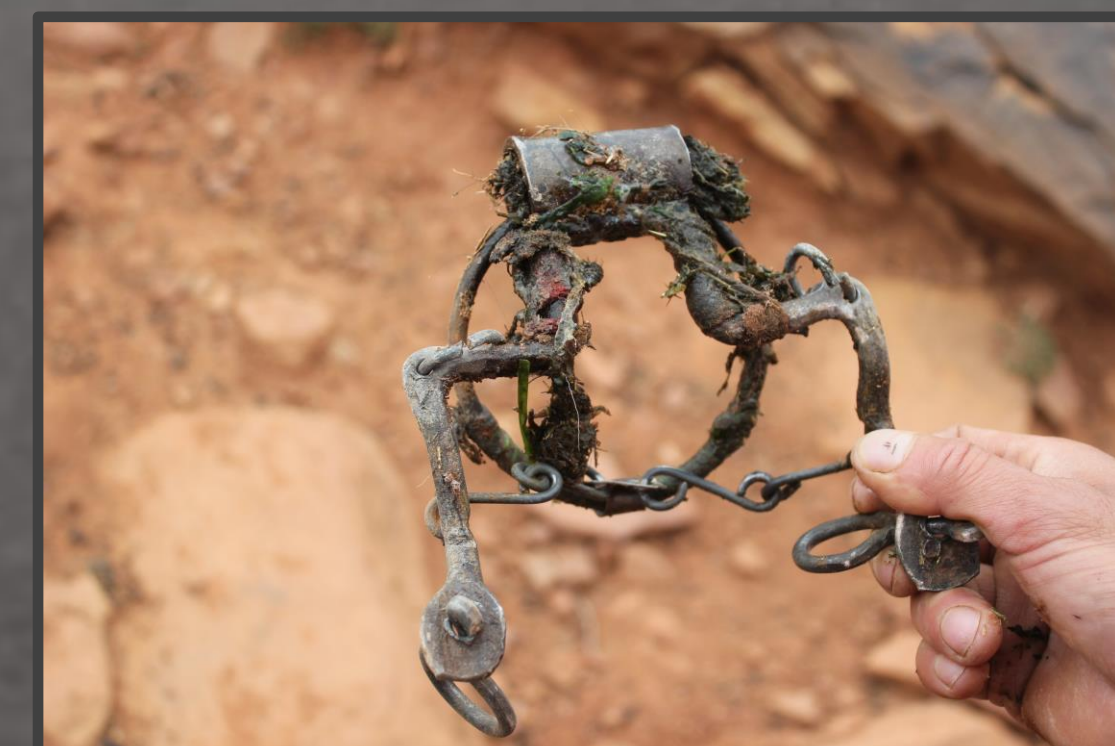
Amongst the problems that the industry is most obviously responsible for is overloading. This causes untold problems as mules suffer chronic damage to their joints and tendons. It can also lead to mules falling and suffering fractures. Riding a loaded mule shows little respect for the mule's welfare and is storing up problems (including dehydration, fatigue, exhaustion and injury) for later. And yet, with few exceptions, most trekking companies do not have a clear policy to ensure mules are not overloaded and that owners do not ride.

Other common welfare abuses that are currently the norm in the industry include:

- Failure to inspect mules and ensure they are fit to work.
- Failure to check equipment is in good condition and fit for purpose.
- Failure to water mules at the start of the day leading to dehydration.
- Failure to provide a balanced healthy diet leading to weight loss and saddle sores.
- Tethering mules with thin nylon ropes that cause rope burns.
- Failure to repair and maintain equipment leading to injury.
- Failure to provide good foot care that respects the natural function of the hoof.
- Failure to provide health care in the event of injury or accident.



Biting injuries caused by the brutal traditional bit



References

- Cousquer and Allison (2012) The Mountain Guide's and expedition leader's ethical responsibilities to pack animals on expedition. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39 (4), 1839-1858.
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Responsible companies will have policies in place that ensure loaded mules are not ridden.